Readings in Medieval Hebrew: The Golden Age of Jewish Bible Commentary  
(JWST459B)

Thursdays 3:30-6:00PM, 2121 Susquehanna Hall  
Instructor: Joshua Dachman <jdachman@umd.edu>  
Office hours: Thursday 12:30-1:30PM, 4135 Susquehanna Hall; by appointment

Tentative Syllabus

Course Description

As the primary sacred text of Jews since ancient times, the Bible has been studied and used for guidance for millennia. The Jewish experience in different places and amidst various cultures has led Jewish scholars to find new meaning and importance for this sacred text and to compose commentaries that made the Bible ever-relevant for their places and times.

Taken together, the collection of Jewish biblical commentaries comprises a sizeable and diverse literature with relevance for halakha, philosophy, mysticism, and Hebrew philology, in addition to the Hebrew Bible itself. In this course we will examine the Jewish commentaries to discover their history and what makes each unique.

In addition, we will learn the methods of scholarly literature as they relate to the Jewish commentators in a “hands-on” manner. Throughout the semester, students will select scholarly articles to “fact check”—to examine critically their arguments based on the primary commentaries. As a capstone assignment, students will complete an entire project in the manner of professional scholars. They will transcribe a commentary from manuscript; translate, and analyze it; and present their findings orally to the class and in writing.

Course Objectives

By the end of the semester, students will gain a knowledge of the Jewish commentators and/or schools of commentary, their cultural background, and potential reasons for the development of the various schools. They will also gain a critical understanding of contemporary methods of scholarly analysis of medieval works. Finally, students will successfully plan an entire project in the authentic manner of professional scholars, including selecting, transcribing, translating, and analyzing a commentary, and effectively communicating and refining their results.

Class

Class time will mostly consist of reading sources and discussing them. Therefore, please print out the packets on Canvas and bring them to class. Please also bring a Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) to class; you may bring one with English translation.

Assignments
In addition to the final exam, there will be two short assignments, a two-part term paper, and a final presentation of the term paper to the class. All written assignments are to be submitted through Canvas. See “Important Dates” below for due dates.

Short Assignments:
Please select one scholarly article from the list provided. Alternatively, you may read another article with the instructor’s permission. After reading the article, please submit your responses to the following points:
1. What is the main thesis of the article?
2. Please select three comments of the biblical commentary cited in the article as support its thesis. Look up those comments inside. In your opinion, do the comments support the article’s thesis? Do they require the article’s thesis, or is there another explanation? Does the article go far enough? Please explain your reasoning based on quotations from the commentary.

Term Paper:
The purpose of the term paper is to analyze a biblical commentary using scholarly methods. The term paper will be divided into two parts as follows.

Part 1: Transcription and translation of a text in manuscript.
Scholars must often deal with biblical commentaries preserved in manuscript form. The first half of the paper involves the transcription and translation of a selection of a commentary in manuscript. Please transcribe a selection of at least 250 words (this is not as much as it sounds!) from a commentary of your choice based on a copy of the manuscript in an appropriate format, as will be discussed in class, and provide a translation. In class we will also discuss how to obtain a copy of a manuscript and provide a list of suggested works to choose from.
Please preface the transcription with brief biographical information about the author and a description of the physical manuscript; this description may be a near-verbatim copy of your source for the information (with proper documentation). Please also describe where and when the commentary was written, to the extent that this is possible.

Note that the selection of which text you will transcribe must be submitted by Sept 29.

Part 2: Analysis of text.
Consider the biblical commentary selected for part 1 and present some aspect of the author’s approach in biblical interpretation.
You may want to consider how the author compares and contrasts with other biblical commentators regarding the topics discussed in class. Does he have a single approach, or does he adopt a synthesis? Alternatively you may want to contrast the author’s approach to interpretation with a single other commentator.
Please provide at least three quotes from the author to support your thesis; at least one quote should be from the text transcribed in part 1. Please explain how the quotes support your thesis. In preparation, it may be helpful to read your commentary on at least five chapters of the Hebrew Bible.

Please schedule a time before Nov. 17 to meet with me to discuss the topic of your paper.
The paper must be formatted according to a standard academic format, such as Chicago or (Chicago-)Turabian, including bibliography. Please double space and include page numbers. Minimum number of pages: 5.

Presentation:
The presentation on the last class session is your opportunity to share the research of your term paper with the class. You will be given 10 minutes to present your thesis and evidence based on passages in the commentary.

Grading procedure

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Selection of text for term paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Short Assignment 1:</td>
<td>10%</td>
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<td>Term paper part 1:</td>
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<td>Short Assignment 2:</td>
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<td>Presentation and term paper part 2</td>
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<td>Final exam</td>
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Important Dates

The selection of text for the first part of the term paper and the first short assignment are due Thursday, September 29 at 11:59 PM. The first half of the term paper is due Thursday, October 20 at 11:59 PM. Please schedule a time to meet with me to discuss the topic of the second half of the term paper; this meeting should be before when the second short assignment is due, Thursday November 17 at 11:59 PM. Presentations will be given in the next-to-last session of class on Thursday December 1 and possibly the following session as well. The second half of the term paper is due at the end of Reading Day, Tuesday, December 13 at 11:59 PM. The final will be sometime between Dec 14-20; please consult the registrar’s schedule of final exams for the exact date and time.

The fine print

- Students expecting to be absent from class due to religious observance are expected to inform the instructor within the first three weeks of class.
- In accordance with university policy, any student with a disability documented by the Disability Support Service Office must inform the instructor within the drop/add period for appropriate accommodation.
- Students absent from class even when excused are responsible for the material taught. If a student has an excused absense when an exam is administered, he or she is expected to arrange with the instructor for an alternative time to take the exam.
- It is expected that students will conform to the honor-code and honor-pledge, as administered by the student honor council.
- Class lectures and other materials are copyrighted and may not be reproduced for anything other than personal use without written permission from the instructor.
Tentative Course Schedule

Unit 1: Introduction / Historical Overview

Unit 2: *Peshat* and *midrash*

Excursion: Methods of Manuscript Transcription

Unit 3: Philosophical Approaches

Unit 4: Linguistic Approaches and Literary Techniques

Unit 5: Religious Polemics

Excursion: Scholarly Analysis of Biblical Commentators

Unit 6: Biblical Composition and Textual Issues

Unit 7: Approaches to Specific Biblical Books

Unit 8: Miscellaneous Topics